

Spartanburg County votes to send tourism initiative to visitors bureau

By *Jason Spencer*
jason.spencer@shj.com

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Spartanburg County Council voted 5-1 on Monday to move a major tourism initiative under the auspices of the local Convention and Visitors Bureau rather than create a new corporation.

The action caps months of work by dozens of community members who were hoping to see a countywide tourism plan realized by a tourism corporation with its own governing board and committee structure.

"I, for one, am not in favor right now of expanding government bureaucracy — especially when there's a time and opportunity to bring in different resources (and) consolidate what we've already got," said Councilman Roger Nutt.

The 45-member steering committee that worked on the plan brought in a Greenville consultant to birth the "Spartanburg: Revolutionary" branding concept.

The concept uses a repeating theme to link different aspects of Spartanburg's history, people and industry, from this area's role in the Revolutionary War to landing BMW Manufacturing Co.'s only North American production plant.

The "Revolutionary" logo already adorns the Convention and Visitors Bureau's 2011 visitors guide.

“Thousands of man-hours were spent on this. Thousands of volunteer man-hours,” said Angela Viney, director of the Spartanburg office of Upstate Forever. “So, I’m disappointed. It will be interesting to see what parts the CVB implements and what parts it doesn’t.”

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The tourism plan was spearheaded by Pacolet Mayor Elaine Harris, who was very enthusiastic about it. After the county’s vote, supporters offered Harris their condolences.

Harris said she remained hopeful that the county or Convention and Visitors Bureau, itself under the auspices of the Spartanburg Area Chamber of Commerce, would make the tourism plan available online so different groups can use it.

“We did not have a plan for tourism, and we were losing opportunities to apply for grants because of that,” Harris said. “And we were not major players in the state plan, because we were fractured and didn’t have our own plan.”

Because the county accepted the plan, such grants can be pursued, Harris said.

But the acceptance came with a hitch. Councilman David Britt, who made the motion to accept it, did so in a way that gave the Convention and Visitors Bureau the ability to pick and choose what it wants to implement. Britt also asked two members be added to the bureau’s advisory committee — one person knowledgeable of the area’s history and one to help promote agri-tourism.

That accounts for two of the five “pillars” of tourism identified by the far-reaching plan. The others are art and culture, recreation and manufacturing.

The plan also called for creating a county agri-tourism position and another new position at the chamber. Nutt and Britt expressed concern about that, along with potential funding sources, last month. The two — which represent a majority of

the council's three-man livability committee — met on Feb. 8 with several key players, including County Councilwoman Jane Hall.

Hall, who co-chaired the tourism committee with Harris, cast the lone dissenting vote Monday.

“There was a buy-in to this whole plan from all over Spartanburg County. The Convention and Visitors Bureau, being a division of the Chamber of Commerce. ... The chamber does not represent all businesses in Spartanburg County. There are many small businesses that cannot afford to be a part of the chamber but could bring tourism here,” Hall said.

During last year's budget debate, Council Chairman Jeff Horton pushed through a measure to divert \$200,000 in hospitality tax dollars to the Spartanburg Tourism Corp. Now that the corporation is off the table, Horton said he presumed the money would go to the Convention and Visitors Bureau.

Horton said he had a “Spartanburg: Revolutionary” pin to wear every day of the week.

After the meeting, Hall said feelings of anti-government sentiment played into Monday's vote.

“They were looking for an outlet to push this under that the county is not immediately responsible for,” Hall said. “And they found that in the CVB.”